DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 166 JC 830 816

AUTHOR Keeton, Morris
TITLE Is Experience the Best Teacher?
PUB DATE 8 Apr 83
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Information Analyses (070)
JOURNAL CIT Innovation Abstracts; v5 n11 Apr 8 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Definitions; *Experiential Learning; Learning Theories; Literature Reviews; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

The best learning results from experiential learning, the interplay between theory and experience. In experiential learning, the student is in direct touch with the realities being studied. It involves not merely undergoing the experience, but also doing something with the phenomenon. Theories of experiential learning include: (1) learning how to do a task or play a role; (2) reformulating knowledge already learned; and (3) developing affective and cognitive insights. The challenge in experiential education is to find ways to combine the theoretical and experiential components of learning programs. (DC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED237166

IS EXPERIENCE THE BEST TEACHER?

by Morris Keeton

Innovation Abstracts; v5 n11 April 8, 1983

JC830816

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

KAREN WATKINS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

VOL. V
NO. 11

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development
With support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education

IS EXPERIENCE THE BEST TEACHER?

No, but neither is theory. The best learning results from an interplay between theory and experience, idea and application, reflection and encounter. Happening upon or inventing the most creative interactions between the two is the luck and the art of enriching teaching through experiential learning.

There is an irony about writing and reading about experiential learning. If the best learning requires some "hands-on" experience, does that requirement not apply to learning about experiential learning also? By all means! So to save this Abstract from being just that, you who read it must promptly devise a way to try the ideas out.

To encourage both newcomers to experiential education to give it a try and "old hands" to sophisticate their practice, let me review some of the most influential theories about experiential learning and refer in each case to the body of experience out of which those theories have grown.

A Definition of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is here defined as learning in which the learner is in direct touch with the realities being studied. It can be contrasted with learning in which the learner reads, hears, talks, or writes about those referents, but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process.

Experiential learning is not to be equated with "off-campus" or "non-classroom" learning, which can be just as devoid of first-hand encounter with the objects of study as are some classes on campus. Also a class in group psychology can involve in-class encounters; a class in French can involve speaking idiomatic French with an informant; and a course in theater will surely involve enacting scenes if not witnessing and performing whole plays for later analysis.

Experiential learning typically *involves not merely "undergoing" experiences* (observing children in nursery school, photographing the stars) *but also doing something with the phenomenon* (experimenting with pressure, heat, and mass in a physics laboratory; using accurate empathy in crisis intervention in an internship in social work). The uses of experiential components of an instructional strategy vary: to test a theory, to improve skills, to seek clues to a new theory, to achieve a social objective by applying a theory, and so on. Every educational activity is an experience for the learner, of course; but only a limited proportion of programs include experiences of the referent of the study which are undergone with the result or for the purpose of gaining new understanding. It is this latter only that I mean by experiential learning.

Diverse Theories of Experiential Learning

The origins of experiential learning go back beyond Aristotle, who studied biological phenomena at first hand, to Guatama Buddha, whose followers were to leave their habitual ways to try the Eight-fold Path. The roots reach back to the primitive hunter whose son learned the art of hunting in the actual pursuit and learned tribal magic by participation in ritual.

Learning how: Learning how to do a task or play a role is normally best done through practice or as close a simulation as is safely and economically manageable. So it is with typing, bicycling, swimming, debating, performing surgery, engaging in politics. But as these tasks become more complex, more difficult, and more significant in their effects, the greater the need for mentors, analysis of performance, reflection upon alternative ways, and understanding of the principles underlying performance

Program in Community College Education, The University of Texas at Austin, EDB 348, Austin, Texas 78712

that reaches desired ends. In the late nineteenth century Osler of Johns Hopkins University wanted to be remembered as the first medical educator who taught his students on the wards. Gilbert Ryle, a British philosopher, makes much of the distinction between "knowing how" and knowing that" (e.g., knowing how to drive a car vs. understanding the theory as to how the motions of a car occur and are controlled).

Reformulating knowledge: More fundamental than learning how to do something is creating new knowledge or transforming oneself, though learning a new role borders on self-reconstruction. It was John Dewey who contributed most to awareness of this function of experiential learning. As Dewey states, this process at best results in a "reconstruction" of experience (as in the formulation of the Newtonian laws of motion or in Einstein's reformulation), a recodifying of habits (as in overcoming racial bias), and ongoing questioning of old ideas (a habit of learning experientially). Thus experiential learning so pursued transforms the individual, revises and enlarges knowledge, and alters practice. It affects the aesthetic and the ethical commitments of individuals and alters their perceptions and their interpretations of the world.

Affective and cognitive insights: Psychological therapy, like medicine, has often found "cures" before it was understood why the treatment worked. Jung, Erikson, Rogers, Perls, and Masiow are theorists who have advocated new approaches to therapy and sought theories to explain successes and failures in treatment. They emphasize the interplay of the affective and the cognitive functions in the same person and the powerful role of affect in shaping behavior. Becoming able to function well is a matter of learning new patterns of acting, thinking, and feeling; and practicing these ways in the context of reflecting upon the practice is a dominant pattern in diverse modalities of therapy. Though teachers often contrast teaching and therapy, learning to love learning, to cherish inquiry, and to act upon theory are all tasks that engage the affective and volitional as well as the cognitive side of human nature.

Other Theories of Experiential Learning: Numerous other lines of inquiry have thrown light upon experiential learning: the work of Kurt Lewin on group dynamics and action research, the studies by Piaget and Bruner on children's patterns of cognition and learning, the studies of simulation and information assimilation by James Coleman, the social critique of western cultures in antinomian theologies, Marxist studies, and pragmatist philosophy (e.g., in applications by Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich to education); epistemological studies on the explication of meaning (notably by the British Empiricists and by Kant and later thinkers seeking to integrate their contributions), and recent studies of learning syles (Kolb) and of the place of experiential learning in liberal education (Smythe) and in informal learning (Tough).

Some Tasks Ahead

As I hinted at the outset, the challenge in experiential education is to find or invent ways to increase and enhance learning by more astute strategies which combine theoretic and experiential components in learning programs. Research is needed on which strategies promote diverse learning outcomes. Teaching ventures are needed which explore for promising new models. The possibilities for the art of teaching are greatly extended when the full range of activity from purest theorizing through simulation to experiment to practice and observation is used in evoking learning.

Morris Keeton, Director
Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning

For further information or a copy of the bibliography, contact the author at CAEL, Lakefront North, Suite 300, Columbia, MD 21044.

Editor's Note: Dr. Keeton will be a keynote speaker for our National Conference on Teaching Excellence held here in Austin, May 24-27, 1983.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
April 8, 1983, VOL. V, NO. 11

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for $35 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and bimonthly during summer months.

© The University of Texas at Austin, 1983
Further duplication is permitted only by MEMBER institutions for their own personnel.